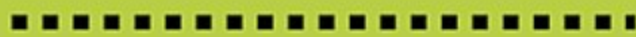


"We Caught That Wave": Promoting Healthier Food in Saanich Recreation Facilities



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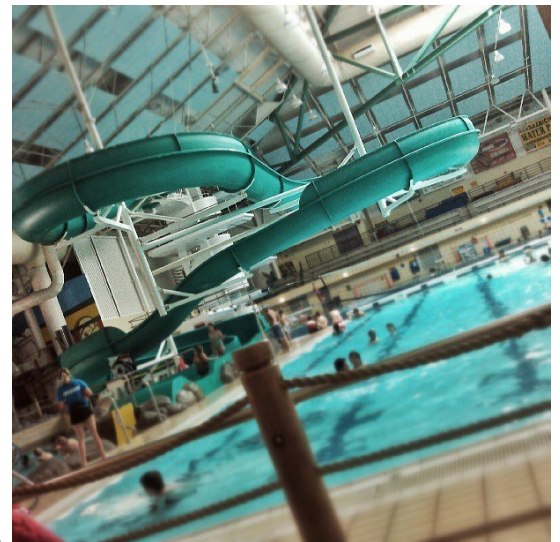
"We Caught That Wave": How a Groundswell of Support led to Healthier Foods in Saanich Recreation Facilities

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Saanich Commonwealth Place is one of four recreational facilities that fall under the umbrella of Saanich Recreation in the District of Saanich, British Columbia. In early 2006, the food offered for sale at Commonwealth Place was replete with unhealthy options. As described by Tom Bryce, Saanich facility manager, it was “a typical recreation centre that had the French fries and hotdogs.” A decade later, the deep fryers long gone, this story outlines Saanich Recreation’s experience in ‘catching the wave’ of public nutrition policy and creating healthier food environments in its community recreation centres.

The Rising Tide: Recognizing the Need for Change

In 2005, the Government of British Columbia released “*Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools* (Province of British Columbia, 2015).” These guidelines were developed in tandem with the “*Healthier Choices in Vending Machines in BC Public Buildings Policy*,” which was released in 2006 (Province of British Columbia, 2014). Following the release of these guidelines, the provincial government granted the BC Healthy Living Alliance funds to support a number of initiatives, including the Healthy Food and Beverage Sales in Recreation Facilities and Local Government Buildings (HFBS) (Naylor, Wekken, Trill & Kirbyson, 2010). Co-led by the Union of BC Municipalities and the BC Recreation and Parks Association, the objective of the HFBS initiative was to increase community capacity to promote healthy food and beverage choices in community recreational facilities and government buildings. The HFBS planned to accomplish this aim through the voluntary adoption of the provincial nutrition guidelines for vending in public buildings.



Saanich Commonwealth Place, Flickr

In early 2008, the Union of BC municipalities and the BC Recreation and Parks Association issued a call for proposals to BC municipalities regarding participation in the HFBS initiative. The timing of the HFBS initiative couldn't have been better for the District of Saanich. In 2007, the Community Services section of Saanich Parks and Recreation Department was tasked with improving the availability of healthy food options in their buildings and worked closely with recreational facilities to adapt their food services to meet the new guidelines.



Community, Wikimedia Commons

Around the same time, Saanich Recreation was receiving feedback from patrons who had expressed a desire for healthier food options. To that end, representatives from Community Services and Parks and Recreation developed a position paper entitled “*Offering Healthy Food and Beverage Choices in Saanich Recreation Facilities*” and brought the issue to Saanich Municipal Council. With an increasing public appetite for healthier —

food options in recreational facilities and the HFBS initiative's support and resources, City Council endorsed the position paper and supported the development of a proposal to participate as a mentor community in the HFBS pilot study.

Catching a Wave: Identifying Supports and Forming Partnerships

In 2008, the Union of BC Municipalities and the BC Recreation and Parks Association selected the District of Saanich as a mentor community in the HFBS pilot study. Communities participating in the HFBS initiative were provided with training, technical support, seed funding, and a resource toolkit, which included sample policies, contracts, and marketing materials (Naylor et al. 2010). Saanich Recreation staff received training on how to access and use project resources, such as the *Brand Name Food List* and *Dial-A-Dietitian* to find products that meet BC's provincial nutrition guidelines (Naylor et al., 2010).

With support from the HFBS initiative, Saanich Recreation engaged in a number of activities to create healthier food environments in their facilities. For example, they conducted an audit of their current vending services, hosted “trade shows” of healthy food choices, and organized —

— focus groups with recreational facility users to develop strategies to promote healthier food in their facilities. Guided by the “*Offering Healthy Food and Beverage Choices in Saanich Recreation Facilities*” position paper and the HFBS resource tool kit, Saanich Recreation also established a working group comprised of representatives from four Saanich recreational facilities and the Community Services Department. The goal of this working group was to develop a work plan including action items and a timeline for policy implementation. Each Saanich facility had its own separate plan, which fit into a larger plan for Saanich Recreation as a whole.



Healthy Vending Machine, Flickr

An example of a recreational facility-specific work plan was the development of a new, healthier concession stand at Saanich Common-

wealth Place. Staff members from all departments of Saanich Commonwealth Place were involved in planning a two-week closure of the AquaTerra Café in order to transition concession services to a new healthy menu. In late 2008, the grand reopening of the concession was advertised throughout the facility with posters and staff newsletters.

Avoiding a Wipeout: Facing Challenges

Prior to participating in the HFBS initiative in 2008, Saanich Recreation was under existing contracts for both vending and concession services. As part of their participation in the HFBS initiative, a key area of focus was preparing for the impending expiration of vending and concession contracts. Consequently, with the help of the HFBS, Saanich Recreation developed Requests for Proposals (RFPs) for both vending and concession contracts that reflected the organization’s shift to healthier food environments. These RFPs outlined the rationale behind the transition to healthier food options and included terms of reference indicating that at least 75% of food and beverage choices provided must be from the “Sell Most” and “Sell Sometimes” categories as outlined in the provincial healthy vending policy (Province of British Columbia, 2014). Vendor proposals were scored based on their plans to

—follow the nutritional requirements outlined in the RFPs, in addition to factors related to finance, marketing, and scope of services. A committee comprised of representatives from facility management, Saanich Community Services, and Purchasing was also formed to evaluate the proposals.

The approaching end date of the concession contract in August 2008 provided an ideal opportunity to issue the revised RFP and move to healthier menus in concessions. The challenge, however, was that the contract for vending was set to end a year later, in May 2009. Management recognized the importance of providing a level playing field for all food and beverage sales in the facility. Although the vending contract was still in effect, facility manager Tom Bryce approached the vending machine contractor mid-contract and requested a modification to their existing contract. Having already implemented similar changes in local schools, the vendor agreed to provide 75% healthy choices in facility vending machines.

Another challenge in implementing the nutrition guidelines in Saanich recreational facilities was the common perception in the food industry that selling healthier food is unprofitable (Olstad, Raine & McCargar 2012). Food service contractors were concerned as to whether they could make the same gross revenue if they adhered to the nutrition guidelines for healthy eating. There

was also concern that there would be a decrease in recreational facility food sale commissions.

Contrary to perceived concerns regarding loss of profit, the newly renovated healthy *Aqua-Terra Café* at Saanich Commonwealth Place, which reopened in late 2008, exceeded the annual gross food and beverage sales from previous years. However, vending machine net sales decreased. To offset the loss of profit, promotional pricing was used to encourage the purchase of healthy vending items, while providing an increased profit margin for unhealthy options. Upon reviewing vending sales data, Bryce worked with the vending contractor to offer healthier choices at a lower price while increasing the cost of less healthy options. Following a full fiscal year of healthy vending, Bryce made adjustments to anticipated net income from vending in both the facility budget and the vending agreement. These changes were reviewed and supported by council through that year's budget approval process.

Riding the Wave, Successes Thus Far

According to facility management, the current changes to the food environment in Saanich recreational facilities, such as the increased availability of healthy options in vending machines and the new healthier food concession, have been well received by the

— community. This is especially the case at Saanich Commonwealth Place which, in addition to providing recreation opportunities for the community, houses national training centres for high performance athletes. Indeed, despite initial concerns about losing revenue and lower profits, the new healthy menu at the *AquaTerra Café* concession has generated more sales than the past menu.

Reflecting on the process thus far, Tom Bryce refers to the support from municipal council and the community as key facilitators to the successes achieved at Saanich Recreation. High-level support and the commitment to providing a healthier food environment in their recreational facilities are exemplified by council's willingness to absorb the net loss in vending commissions. Council also provided much needed funding for infrastructure changes, such as the removal of deep fryers and the purchase of additional refrigeration units. The District of Saanich was also fortunate to have had the capacity building support of the HFBS initiative. The availability of provincial nutrition policy and guidelines, the *Brand Name Food List*, *Dial-A-Dietitian*, and other tools and resources from the HFBS made it easier for everything to fall in place very quickly. Further, the willingness of the existing vending contractor to comply with the provincial nutrition guidelines was a key facilitator. From the perspective of someone

facing the task of overhauling food services in multiple facilities, Tom Bryce noted that it “was almost like being able to reach over and take a package off the shelf.”

Maintaining Balance: Evaluating and Moving Forward

Moving forward, the District of Saanich is currently evaluating the impact of its efforts to create healthier food environments. Staff members have been trained to perform audits of the food and beverages available in vending machines and concessions to ensure that facilities continue to stay on track. Currently, the organization uses regular vending and concession audits to evaluate and identify areas for improvement, such as the food offered at staff meetings and staff celebrations.

I would say we've gotten more out of this by taking the leadership role and making the step than we would have if we stayed where we were.

Tom Bryce
Facility Manager
Saanich Commonwealth Place

Although Saanich has experienced a number of successes, new challenges have emerged. For example, the adoption of a policy that banned sales of bottled water in recreational facilities has led to the substitution of sugar-sweetened beverages for water. The resulting challenge is figuring out how to adhere to both policies. With that said, there are also new opportunities for healthy change. For instance, there is a recognition that families want to eat healthier, but often lack the time. As a result, the concession operator at Saanich Commonwealth Place is looking at selling bulk items, such as homemade soups, that families can grab and go.

The experience in Saanich speaks loudly for organizations being attentive to windows of opportunity to move forward with creating healthy food environments in their facilities. The creation of a public nutrition policy and the well-timed support of the HFBS initiative to build capacity for the uptake of provincial nutrition guidelines were key elements to success. Further, from a management perspective, there has been tremendous value in being a leader in this type of change. In addition to sharing the story of their success through the HFBS initiative, Saanich Commonwealth Place has received numerous inquiries from jurisdictions across Canada looking to learn from their experience.

Key Lessons



- ◆ **Build a diverse team** and work together to make a plan for change.
- ◆ **Identifying high-level champions** is crucial to moving forward with organizational change. Continued commitment and support of policy makers, such as municipal council, are vital throughout the change process
- ◆ **Resources and tools from capacity building initiatives** such as HFBS are crucial to the uptake of nutrition guidelines and policy.
- ◆ **Policy modifications to organizational processes** (e.g. RFPs and staff training) can help sustain change over time.
- ◆ **Change needs to be promoted** through existing resources, education, and marketing.



For More Information:

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For more information on the *Healthy Food and Beverage Sales in Recreational Facilities and Other Government Buildings Initiative* including the *Healthy Choices in Recreation Toolkit*, please visit:

www.stayactiveeathealthy.ca.

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